



In the shadow of the mayor

The importance of hierarchy in choosing cabinet members in mid-sized French cities

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Series: Local elections as seen by the social sciences

After his investigation into the representativeness of local councillors in France, Michel Koebel has now turned his attention to the selection and sociology of cabinet members in medium-sized municipalities in France. This study highlights the hierarchy and ranking processes at play in local councils and the importance of “social filtering” according to age, gender and profession.

Multiple factors come into play when French mayors choose their deputies – that is to say, the members of the council executive or cabinet – and distribute the various portfolios among them. The evidence suggests these factors are clearly related to the process of compiling party lists, as in almost all cases it is the order of the candidates on the winning party list that defines the ranks of the deputy mayors. The selection process cannot, however, be reduced to objective qualifications and criteria. The strategies implemented are complex; they are subject to party-political considerations, the effects of interpersonal networks, the desire to allocate symbolic rewards for loyal supporters, regulatory obligations (gender parity) and factors related to the presentation of party lists (age, occupation, community leadership, etc.). They can also depend on factors related to coalition and cooperation (e.g. whether certain party lists merge before the first round or between the two rounds) and on various legal obligations (such as limits on the number of deputy mayors that can be appointed), which vary according to the size of the municipality. The recent gender parity law has significantly reduced the – previously quite considerable – male dominance of cabinet positions since it came into force in time for the 2008 municipal elections.

This article discusses the social factors that affect the allocation of these cabinet positions, based on a recent study of a sample of 894 deputy mayors from 79 medium-sized French towns averages (all 27 towns with 60,000 to 80,000 inhabitants and a random sample of 50 towns – out of the 492 that exist – with 10,000 to 20,000 inhabitants¹). Data extracted from the Répertoire national des élus (RNE – National Directory of Elected Officials)² has been supplemented by details of the duties of these deputy mayors (obtained on the websites of the municipalities concerned or directly from the town hall), which then all had to be classified and categorised, given the proliferation of different titles in use.

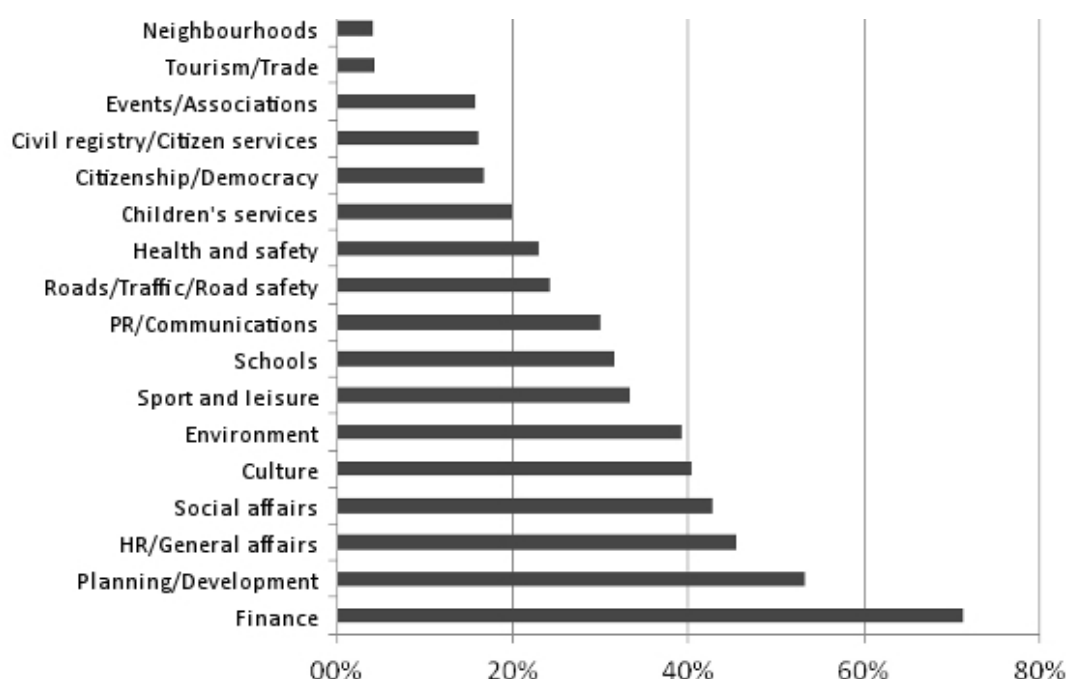
¹ This selection is linked in particular to comparability requirements (number of cabinet posts, application of gender parity laws, etc.).

² The Répertoire national des élus (RNE – National Directory of Elected Officials) lists – among other information – the age, gender, declared occupation, size of municipality, status (mayor, cabinet member with rank, or municipal councillor) and political affiliation (declared party or persuasion) for every local councillor in France.

The prestige of cabinet positions

It is worth pointing out that, within the municipal executive, the mayor is by far the most prestigious role and accumulates the most power. This is as much due to the rules concerning the allocation of competencies as to the election method and rules in force (in the case of “closed lists”³). What interested me here was how to order the various deputies according to a hierarchy. In the absence of any variation in the allowance they receive, any differences in remuneration are necessarily purely symbolic. Anyone who knows even a little bit about how municipal councils work will be aware that the relative importance of deputy mayors is expressed through their rank (which is not merely a matter of formality) and the nature of the responsibilities entrusted to them (i.e. their portfolios). With this in mind, I first classified deputy mayors by comparing ranks and portfolios in order to attempt to produce a hierarchy of the various positions held within municipal councils.

Graph 1: Portfolios held by the four most senior cabinet members⁴



Source: Répertoire national des élus (National Directory of Elected Officials), French interior ministry, 2010.
Interpretation: 71.3% of cabinet members responsible for finance hold one of the four most senior cabinet ranks.

In the hierarchy of portfolios presented above, it is finance that dominates (indeed, in 47.5% of cases, this responsibility is entrusted to the first deputy). Urban planning and development was the next most important portfolio (assigned to the first deputy mayor in 27.3% of cases, a distant second place behind finance), followed by human resources (often combined with or incorporated into “general affairs”). Social affairs and culture come next, but these portfolios are less often allocated to first deputies (21%). These are followed by the environment, sport and leisure, schools⁵, and

³ Until recently, “closed list” elections applied only to municipalities with more than 3,500 inhabitants, but this threshold was lowered to 1,000 inhabitants with effect from March 2014. In “open list” elections, voters can add or strike out names on the candidate list(s) in their municipality and, where there is more than one list, select certain candidates from each lists, in a process known in French as *panachage* (“picking and mixing”).

⁴ As the number of deputy mayors concerned was too low, the “jobs/employment” and “youth” portfolios were not included in this categorisation.

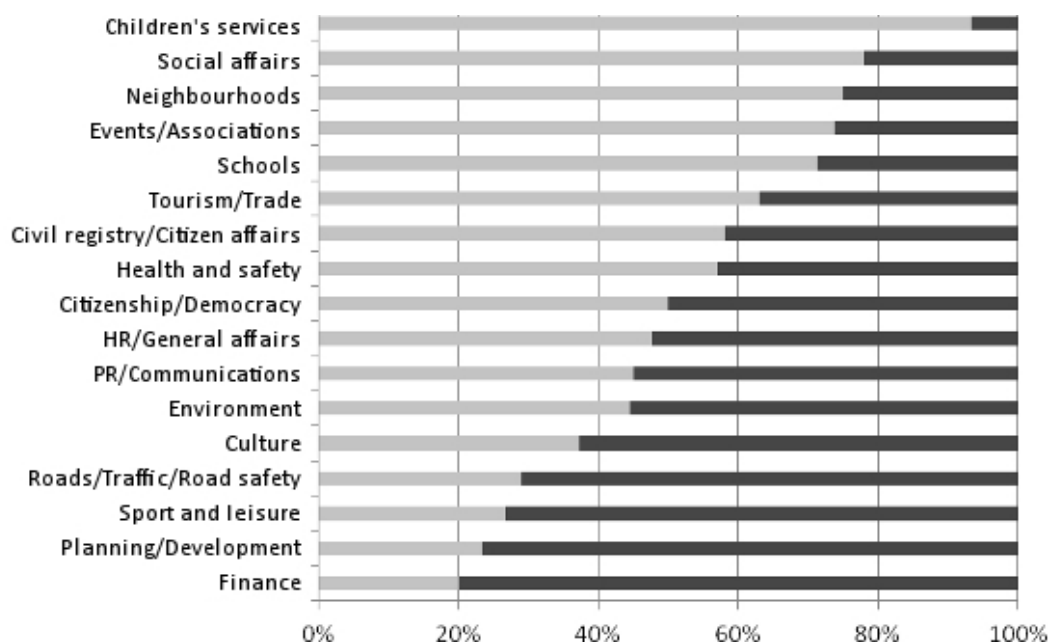
⁵ Translator’s note: in France, municipal councils are responsible for buildings and non-teaching staff in nursery and primary schools only. Lower secondary (*collège*) and upper secondary (*lycée*) school buildings and non-teaching staff are the responsibility of departmental and regional councils respectively. All public-sector teaching staff in

public relations/communications. All other responsibilities are almost always assigned to the lower-ranking deputy mayors: children's services (early years, families, etc.) and, somewhat more surprisingly, democracy and citizenship, civil registry and citizen services, and events and associations, as well as tourism, trade and neighbourhood management. The choice of portfolio is also influenced by the mayor's political persuasion, but the differences are subtle. For example, when the mayor identifies as more left-wing, the first deputy is more often allocated responsibility for culture (15.4% compared to 7.1% for right-wing mayors), social affairs (13.3% compared to 5.4%) or democracy (6.3% compared to 0%). Conversely, mayors identifying as more right-wing more often opt for planning and development (15.2% compared to 6.8%), schools (11.1% compared to 4.7%), PR and communications (10% compared to 0%) or sport and leisure (8.7% compared with 0%). The percentage of women among the top-ranking deputy mayors also varies according to political affiliation: on average, women hold the posts of first or second deputy mayor in 43% of towns with Socialist Party (PS) mayors, while this figure is just 30% in towns led by mayors affiliated to the right-wing UMP party. The effect of gender parity laws on the allocation of portfolios also provides an insight into the political forms of gender domination at play.

Executive tasks divided by gender

An initial confirmation of the extent of male domination in politics is provided when we consider the gendered division of responsibilities according to their level prestige within council cabinets. The evidence is clear: with the exception of sport and leisure (an unglamorous but almost exclusively male portfolio), most of the high-profile roles in the municipal hierarchy are massively allocated to men. Conversely, the least coveted responsibilities are overwhelmingly entrusted to women. These roles are also most often associated, in the collective imagination, with femininity: children, early years and families, schools and education, etc. One exception, however, is social business – a portfolio that is overwhelmingly entrusted to women (and probably for the same reasons) – but which nevertheless enjoys a higher status within council cabinets.

Graph 2: Portfolios of cabinet members by gender



Source: Répertoire national des élus (National Directory of Elected Officials), French interior ministry, 2010.

France are employed and managed directly by the education ministry via the *rectorat* in each *département*.

Analyses using the same intersecting variables were performed for various sub-populations (according to the gender of the mayor, mayoral political affiliation, municipal population size), without producing any fundamental changes to the above lists. When the mayor is a woman – which was the case in just 8 of the 79 municipalities in the survey sample – the assignment of portfolios tends rather to reinforce male dominance of the most important posts (of 10 cabinet members with responsibility for finance, 9 were men, as were 7 of the 8 members with responsibility for planning); as for the bottom end of the list (children’s services, social affairs, etc.), these portfolios were all assigned to women.

But these differences are also related to the fact that female mayors implement the gender parity regulations⁶ by including themselves: when the mayor is a woman, the first deputy mayor is male in seven out of eight cases, whereas when the mayor is a man, two thirds of first deputy mayors are also men. As shown in the following tables, women are more likely to practise alternation in allocating cabinet ranks.

Table 1: Distribution of cabinet posts when the mayor is *male*

Cabinet rank	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Women	24	29	37	34	37	31	35	38
Men	47	41	34	36	34	40	36	33

Source: Répertoire national des élus (National Directory of Elected Officials), French interior ministry, 2010.

Table 2: Distribution of cabinet posts when the mayor is *female*

Cabinet rank	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Women	1	5	1	6	2	6	1	7
Men	7	3	7	2	6	2	7	1

Source: Répertoire national des élus (National Directory of Elected Officials), French interior ministry, 2010.

The result of these methods of distribution is that 48% of deputy mayors are women when the mayor is male, and only 43.8% are women when the mayor is female. The conclusion we might draw from this is that, without necessarily realising it, women – even when they occupy the most prestigious political post at local level – contribute to the male domination of politics. However, in many cases, their position at the top of the candidate list is in reality the result of a prior negotiation that requires them to choose a man as first deputy mayor.

⁶ The General Code for Local Authorities requires that local elections use a list system where the only parity obligation for each list is that “the difference between the number of candidates of each gender must not be greater than one” (Article L. 2122-7-2).

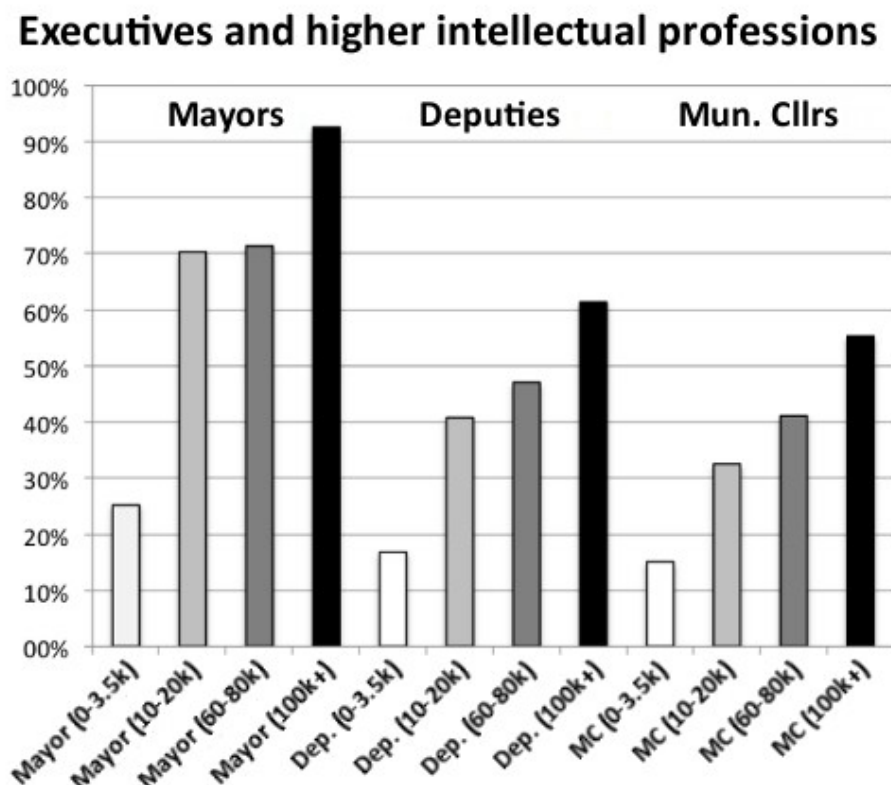
Cabinet members' social profiles

We already knew that, as the population of the municipality increases, access to the most highly valued posts (in political terms) becomes more selective (Koebel 2012). The following graphs (Graphs 3, 4 and 5) illustrate this phenomenon by plotting the number of mayors, deputy mayors (cabinet members) and “standard” municipal councillors (with no portfolio) that belong to certain social categories. They clearly show that manual workers and, to a lesser extent, salaried employees stagnate at extremely low percentages. Local political scenes are dominated by the upper echelons in socio-professional terms, especially in larger towns and cities, where the prestige attached to these posts is proportionately higher. With reference to Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of field and habitus, it is these echelons that possess the highest levels of “capital” (economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital).

If the difference between “standard” municipal councillors and deputy mayors seems less marked than between mayors and their deputies, this is mainly because the “standard councillor” category also includes opposition councillors, i.e. the few councillors at the top of the losing party lists, who would have made it on to the council executive if they had won.

Deputy mayors (and mayors) are also differentiated from “standard” councillors in terms of their declared political affiliations, which become increasingly marked as the municipal population and the position in the municipal hierarchy rises. For example, 72.1% of mayors in our sample claim to belong to one of the two main political parties (the PS and the UMP), whereas this is the case for only 45.9% of first and second deputy mayors, 40.3% of other deputy mayors, and 33.6% of other councillors.

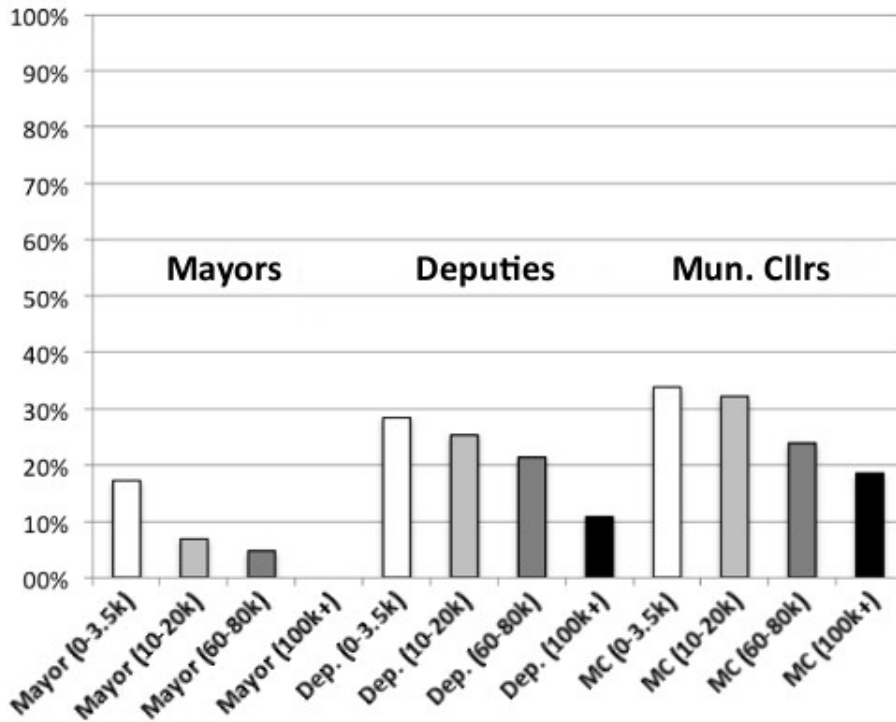
Graphs 3, 4 and 5: Proportion of mayors, deputy mayors and “standard” municipal councillors (MCs) by municipal population, for three different socio-professional categories⁷



Source: Répertoire national des élus (National Directory of Elected Officials), French interior ministry, 2010.

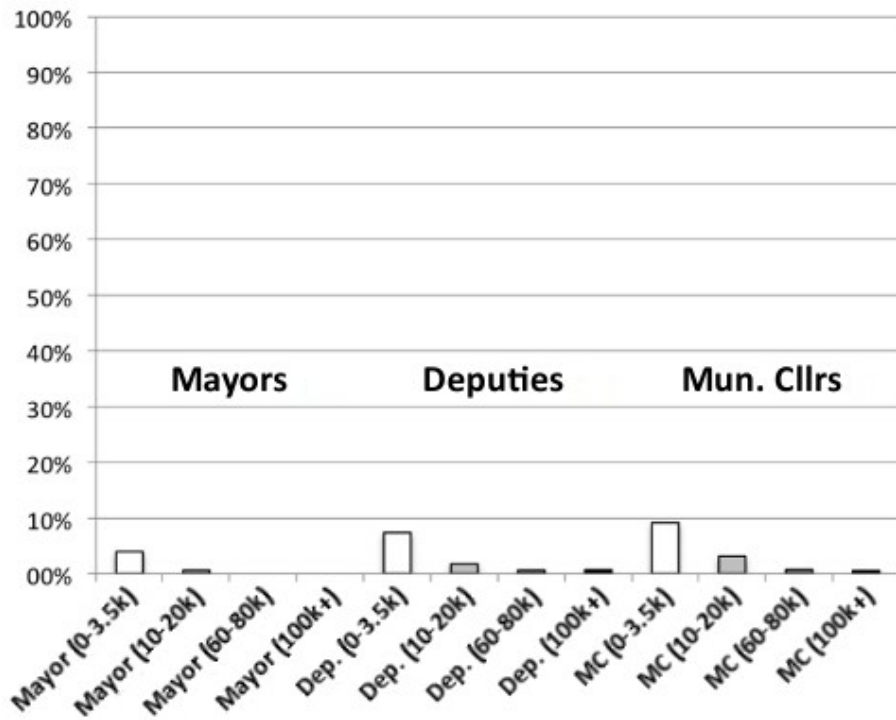
⁷ These three graphs also appeared in an article published in the journal *Pouvoirs* (Koebel 2014).

Salaried employees



Source: Répertoire national des élus (National Directory of Elected Officials), French interior ministry, 2010.

Manual workers



Source: Répertoire national des élus (National Directory of Elected Officials), French interior ministry, 2010.

As might be expected, the highest ranks of deputy mayors are overwhelmingly occupied by executives and higher intellectual professions (EHIPs): more than half of first and second deputies in towns with populations of 10,000 to 20,000 belong to this category, as do between 58% and 65% of first, second and third deputy mayors in towns of 60,000 to 80,000 inhabitants. Among lower-ranking deputy mayors, EHIPs are typically the most common socio-professional category; rare exceptions favour salaried employees or intermediate professions, whose presence can be attributed indirectly to the parity obligation in council cabinets (as these two socio-professional categories are the most “feminised”, with women representing respectively three quarters and half of the total workforce).

Intermediate professions are more frequently represented in “intermediate” posts in terms of cabinet rank, such as sport and leisure, children’s services and families, social affairs and schools. As for salaried employees, they are typically assigned the least prestigious portfolios, such as neighbourhoods, events and associations, or the civil registry. We might also point out that tradespeople, retailers and entrepreneurs are more often given responsibility for tourism and trade, and that 30% of teachers in cabinet positions are assigned portfolios such as schools and culture, following the logic that such posts correspond to their – actual or presumed – professional skills.

Among the variables that have not yet been mentioned, age also plays a role in the distribution of municipal portfolios. There is a widespread belief that experience as an elected official, accumulated over time, trumps any other qualification or competence when it comes to ranking candidates. The exception to this rule is deputy mayors under 40 (who, even so, represent barely more than 10% of all cabinet members). This selection by age (especially common among men) is even more pronounced among mayors, as only 3.7% of those in the sample were aged under 40, despite the fact that 18-to-39-year-olds represent some 34% of the electorate.

Over 40% of cabinet members for schools and for children’s services, early years and families are aged between 40 and 50. This distribution can be explained by the fact that the vast majority of people of this age have children under 18 and are experiencing family life first-hand. The arrival of grandchildren may also explain a second peak after age 60,⁸ when responsibility for schools tends to make way for family-related portfolios. Youth affairs are often symbolically assigned to the youngest executive assistants. Conversely, no deputy mayor under 40 in our survey had been given responsibility for associations, which requires – according to councillors’ perceptions, at least – the accumulation of significant experience in this field, where recognition often comes only after years of personal investment (Koebel 2000).

Male domination and social domination

The central aim of this paper was to test, via quantitative analysis, the hypothesis of social filtering by age, gender and occupation in the distribution of deputy-mayoral positions according to cabinet rank and portfolio allocation. While it is true that the position of mayor is the most selective role, the same is also true of deputy mayors’ posts, even though they remain socially and politically dominated by their leaders, who also manage to thwart the gender parity laws that should ensure a male–female balance among cabinet members. Male domination is still a reality, as is domination by older local social and political elites, who keep a tight hold of the reins of local power and generally take the form of a small band of elected officials including the mayor, the first deputy mayor (or sometimes the first two or three deputies), to whom must be added the council’s chief executive and the mayor’s chief of staff.

⁸ While it is true that this closely corresponds to retirement age, the received wisdom concerning retired people’s availability does not necessarily hold true, as those deputy mayors who are retired are often significantly less involved in municipal affairs than their counterparts aged 50 to 59 (there were 6 deputy mayors of retirement age in towns of 10,000 inhabitants, while there were 14 aged 50 to 59 in towns with more than 3,500 inhabitants).

The social class of those who hold the most power locally has an effect on the content of their policies: sociology has long been shown that living conditions and social belonging produce different ways of thinking – and therefore also ways of thinking regarding policy and action. Under these conditions, how can politicians, who, for the most part, represent the wealthiest strata of the population and yet claim to embody and represent all the inhabitants of their town, possibly “think” in terms of other social backgrounds than their own, or than those who manage to make themselves heard (and who are rarely distant from the former)? In order to achieve this, they ought to engage in efforts to seek the necessary distance from their own positions, so as to successfully understand the interests of other population groups. But do they have the time, the desire or, indeed, the skills to do so? Would they then be prepared to defend those constituents from backgrounds other than their own? For now, this is not the case, and the result is a relegation of the interests of the working classes, who are becoming increasingly disenchanted by, and disenfranchised from, the whole game of representative politics.

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Further reading

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